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ABSTRACT

A mentor system that pairs a new teaching assistant (TA) with an experienced TA has been established at the University of Massachusetts Writing Program. Recruited as volunteers, experienced TAs can consult with the Resource Center staff and with more experienced mentors concerning their role as counselor. Usually, mentors and mentees exchange phone numbers, attend the classes that each other teach, and meet whenever the mentee has questions or problems. At the end of the school year, a followup questionnaire completed by both mentor and mentee provides assessments of the usefulness of the system and suggestions. One learning tool provided by the Resource Center is videotaping new TAs. The TA provides information on what is planned for the class, instructional goals, and the teaching skill that the TA would like to study through watching the tape. The TA and the Resource Center peer counselor each view the tape alone before meeting to discuss the taped class. No one sees the tape except the TA and Resource Center staff without the TA's consent. The peer counselor has undergone training in videotape counseling and approaches the discussion of the videotape with the TA with the objective of helping the TA learn from the experience. (SW)

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TAs HELP TAs:

Peer Counseling and Mentoring

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TAs Help TAs:
Peer Counseling and Mentoring

In the University of Massachusetts Writing Program, experienced teaching assistants meet individually with new teachers, in both formal and informal ways, to discuss their difficulties and successes. New TAs are usually uneasy about admitting to the many problems and questions they have, especially to their faculty advisors and program administrators; they are, however, more likely to feel comfortable with other graduate students who, they can assume, have recently encountered and may still encounter the same problems. I am sure that we all agree on the value of such peer counseling, but insuring truly helpful counseling is not easy. A university department or program must eventually face the difficulty of instituting both widespread and effective counseling. In order to offer new TAs available and trained counselors, our Writing Program depends on the trained staff of graduate students who work in our Resource Center and, to a lesser degree, on the other experienced TAs.

If the four Resource Center staff members were the only recognized mentors in the Program, their jobs would be impossible; answering questions and giving advice and visiting classes, they would have little time for their own teaching and studying. For this reason, we have implemented a mentor system, pairing each new TA with an experienced TA. It works in this way: At the close of a school year, the Resource Center coordinator sends a memo to all TAs who have taught in the Program for at least one year, asking them if they would agree to be mentors the

following year. This insures against our drafting unwilling or uninterested TAs. Each one who responds affirmatively is assigned a new teacher at the start of the next school year. Some Resource Center staff choose to be mentors, but others decide not to because of their own work demands. Usually, mentors and mentees exchange phone numbers, attend each other's classes, and meet whenever the mentee has questions or difficulties. Although it is best for the mentor to initiate this relationship, he or she ought to allow the mentee to determine the frequency of their meetings. An occasional, "How is your class going" demonstrates interest, but too-frequent questions and attentions might be understood by the mentee to be suggestions of his or her incompetence. It is reassuring to the TA, however, to know that another graduate student, experienced both as student and as teacher, would willingly offer help, advice, time, and a sympathetic ear.

Although there is no formal training for mentors, they are encouraged to speak with the Resource Center coordinator and staff, as well as with more experienced mentors if they have questions about their role as counselor. Due to time and financial constraints, mentoring remains a loosely-structured volunteer system, and we must depend on the mentor's good sense and sensitivity in meeting with new TAs. Because many mentors have taught only one or two years in the Program, they easily remember their own first year on the job and treat their mentees as they appreciated being treated themselves.

At the end of the school year, a follow-up questionnaire is sent to all who participated in the mentor system; it asks both mentor and mentee to evaluate the usefulness of the system and to suggest improvements. We invite evaluation of all the activities and services we offer. Not only do responses help us make better subsequent plans, but signed responses frequently indicate TAs who are particularly interested in teacher training and are, therefore, likely candidates for the

Resource Center staff.

This staff provides both support and resources, such as files of successful assignment sequences and challenging in-class activities, knowledge of our many training videotapes, and the experience of teachers who have been at this job for several years. The most formal peer-counseling strategy in which the Resource Center staff play a major role is the videotaping of new TAs. This is how it works: The staff member and TA agree on a mutually convenient time for taping, and the TA completes a short questionnaire which asks for a description of what is planned for the class, what the teacher's goals are, and what teaching skill he or she would like to study through watching the tape. Some TAs focus on the organization of their lectures, others on the clarity of their assignments, and many focus on their direction of class discussions. The counselor then tapes the class and hands the tape over to the TA, who watches it alone, free to observe him or herself on the TV screen, perhaps for the first time. This is no easy viewing. Most of us are uncomfortable watching ourselves, suddenly forced to see the person whom others see. Few TAs concentrate on their teaching skills during the first moments of this first viewing. Initial responses usually sound like: "I am so fat," or, "Do I always flail my arms about like that?" My own reaction to my first videotape was, "Never again will I wear those trousers in public." After the TA recovers from this shock, he or she is likely to view parts of the tape a second time and jot down some observations or questions.

The counselor also views the tape alone, so as to take notes about particular sections. I always place the counter number beside my comments, so I may easily locate the pertinent part of the tape. Once counselor and TA have viewed the tape separately, they meet to watch it (or parts of it) and discuss the class. These peer counselors have learned the value of letting the TA talk as much as possible during these discussions, and it is probably best that the counselor allows the

TA to make those observations of clothing, posture, and mannerisms before gently focusing the conversation on the teaching skill indicated on the questionnaire.

It is far too easy to point to ineffective teaching techniques, and a sensitive counselor knows that it is much more helpful to allow a new TA to discover his or her own weaknesses. It can be frustrating to the more experienced teacher not to label quickly and clearly the problems in a taped class, but such a diagnostic approach may intimidate the TA and damage the trust on which the counseling relationship is based. Moreoever, the teacher will learn more about his or her problems if allowed to talk freely about them. Merely labelling a weakness does not help the TA understand it any better, nor does it encourage the TA to "think out loud" about why he or she acts in this way. When I was first videotaped, my counselor showed me two or three separate parts of the taped class without commenting on them; it did not take me very long to see the pattern of my class behavior. Because I detected it myself, I could identify its roots in my way of thinking and could begin considering ways of improving--all without resenting the counselor for criticism of my teaching.

A counselor may also approach this discussion by referring to the TA's responses on the questionnaire, calling attention to the teaching skill there singled out: for instance, "You mentioned on your questionnaire that you wanted to focus on the clarity of your assignments. Do you think that the taped assignment was any different from others this semester?" This sort of question directs the TA to explore the nature of his or her teaching, perhaps leading to valuable conversation which goes beyond reference to the particular taped class. Occasionally, a counselor recognizes that the truly helpful discussion will not refer to the tape, though it was from viewing the tape that the discussion sprang. Although a counselor may have prepared detailed notes, he or she cannot anticipate the post-taping discussion; rather, the TA should feel comfortable in knowing that the

counselor will listen and will help with whatever the TA thinks is important. We often encourage TAs to be taped twice, either to look at changes in the particular teaching skill they had just studied or to focus on another skill. Repeated tapings and discussions reinforce the bond between TA and counselor, building trust and usually resulting in conversations which more frankly deal with problems.

Our role as counselor does not always come naturally, and part of the Resource Center staff training is learning the most effective counseling behaviors. The very term, peer counselor, reveals the paradox inherent in our position. We are equal to the other TAs (with the same job title, same salary, same student status), yet we are qualified to counsel because of our experience as teachers, our interest in instructional development, and our training as counselors. A brief description of our training for videotape counseling shows the behaviors and attitudes which we think essential for this job. More than just learning to use the video equipment, our training focuses on the communication skills necessary for helpful post-taping discusssions. Before any of our staff tape new TAs they tape one another, view the tapes, and discuss them as we would with a new teacher. The staff coordinator and the other staff members watch this post-taping interview and, afterwards, comment on the counseling. One Resource Center staff member stressed the importance of the counselor/teacher's positive self image when she wrote: "We cannot be credible to others unless we believe we are good teachers and are committed to, and believe in, the videotape procedure as a way of improving teaching skills." We also judge if the counselor is evaluating, rather then describing, the taped class and not allowing the teacher to evaluate his or her own behavior. Descriptive observation encourages the TA to do the work--to discover his or her own problems, without feeling defensive about a counselor pointing a finger at mistakes or ineffective techniques. For example, rather than tell a teacher that he or she introduces an assignment in a disorganized, incomplete,

and unclear fashion, a counselor might say, "I notice that your students have a lot of questions about your assignment." This is likely to initiate a discussion of the teacher's method of presenting the assignment, and the teacher, not the counselor, would be considering the number and nature of those student questions and how they might be anticipated in the assignment itself.

To be effective, videotape counseling must be non-threatening; during our model tape discussions, we are careful to note counseling which is too critical or too directive for new TAs. Had the counselor in the last example said to the TA, "You present your assignment in a confused, incomplete, and vague manner," that TA probably would not have said another word during the discussion; he or she would never have looked more closely at the students' questions or discussed ways to improve assignment presentation. The teacher would have felt inadequate and would have been embarrassed at having the inadequacy exposed to a peer. Rather than encourage self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-improvement, the counselor would have alienated the TA and prevented any discussion. Instead of helping the teacher, the counselor would have been implying that the teacher is beyond help.

We understand that TAs naturally feel vulnerable when others visit their classes, therefore we stress that this videotaping and discussion are free from evaluation; faculty advisors and program administrators cannot see the tapes without the TAs' permission, and Resource Center staff will not discuss the tape or post-taping interviews with them. Our memo to new TAs, in which we describe videotape counseling, emphasizes our respect for their classroom privacy; it says, "the taping is for your use only. No one sees the tape except you and members of the Resource staff, unless you give written consent for its use in training or evaluation." We want new teachers to see that the value of videotaping is that it gives them a chance to see their class from another perspective and discuss the class with a peer who will not criticize or report what he or she sees to anyone else. For

this reason, we discourage TAs from planning special classes for the camera; our intention is to tape classes which demonstrate the teacher's natural strengths and weaknesses.

In many ways, the relationship between peer counselor and TA is similar to that between teacher and student in our Writing Program: both counselor and teacher note strengths and weaknesses and focus on only a few major problems, making concrete and specific comments which assure that improvement is not only possible but highly probable. Both avoid direct criticism whenever a descriptive observation can point to a problem and allow the other to recognize it. Just as the writing teacher should respect the ideas of the student, helping the student with his or her own paper, the counselor should respect the TA's ideas, helping with the class or assignment which the TA is doing and not with one which the counselor would do or has done. In our Writing Program, in which TAs plan and teach their own classes, counselors must encourage TAs to create and develop their own curricula, rather than imitate or borrow the work of more experienced teachers. In a nutshell, the writing teacher's success is revealed in the increasing independence of his or her students, and the counselor's success is revealed in the increasing independence of new TAs.

There are, of course, much less formal ways in which these experienced TAs counsel new TAs, and these informal meetings continue long after a teacher's first or second semester. The four members of the Resource Center staff share office space with new TAs, regularly talking with them, meeting with them over lunch, maintaining a sometimes-daily contact with them. New teachers see us preparing our classes, having conferences with our students, struggling to balance our responsibilities as students and as teachers--doing all the same things they do. Until this school year, the TAs on the Resource Center had shared a small office, separated from other TAs, though conveniently close to the Program administrative offices. This insured our frequently meeting with our staff coordinator

and gave us proximity to the Resource Center library, but it also resulted in many TAs perceiving us as Program spies--intermediaries who would report to the Director any ineffective teaching or dissatisfied teachers, thereby making us partially responsible for job reappointments. Sensitive to this misperception of our job, we explicitly assured new TAs during our pre-service workshop that we are there to help and that we are TAs just as they are. That the four Resource Center staff members share an office with 15 new TAs helps to prove our point. We believe that our position is better understood now by the other teachers in the Program, so we can more openly and confidently discuss our shared difficulties in teaching, and we can establish the trust and honesty which are necessary for truly helpful counseling.

The success of a peer-training program, such as ours at the University of Massachusetts, depends on the commitment and interest of teachers who are generous with their time, their creativity, their experience, and their energy. Planning workshops, organizing social events, videotaping and counseling new teachers, Resource Center staff members try to do all they can to make being a TA a rewarding, educational, enjoyable, and feasible enterprise.